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THE BENE ISRAEL OF BOMBAY

BY

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THE BENE ISRAEL OF BOMBAY

THE following account of the Bene Israel of Bombay does not claim to be a scientific treatise,—the result of years of systematic study of the people. It would be more than presumptuous on the part of the writer to claim to have the final word to say on a subject, which would require the comparative study of a host of peoples, Indian and Palestinian, of various geographical and ethnographical conditions before anything of historical value can definitely be discovered. This is only an attempt to set down views and put forward tentative theories which would invite criticism, and thus open the subject to study and research.

In writing a paper on the Bene Israel, it is necessary first clearly to distinguish them from the other Jews of India. For a great deal of confusion still seems to exist in the minds of Westerns as to the exact identity of the Bene Israel.

There are four different Hebrew communities in India. First, there is the European Jewish population, a mere handful in number. It includes those who, mostly in business or in the professions, or as Government officials, make India their home for a few years, and being scattered throughout the length and breadth of the vast land, cannot be said to form a distinct congregation at all.

Next there is the *Yehoodi* community. The name is but the Hebrew form of "Jew" יְהוּדִי, and is applied to a community of Jews from Bagdad, Jerusalem, from Palestine generally, and a few from Persia. No doubt the term was chosen in contradistinction to Bene Israel—or Children of Israel.

A third community is settled in the extreme south in Cochin, and are hence called *Cochin Jews*. The Cochinis have authentic historical records about the date of their immigration into India, and about their early history.

I would ask you to distinguish the *Bene Israel* carefully from both the Yehoodis and the Cochin Jews.

There is a fifth class of Jews in India, called *Kala Israel* or *Black Jews*, to whom I must refer. Kala Israel is a term reserved by the Jews of Cochin and by the Bene Israel for those of mixed descent and also for proselytes, claiming the term *White Jews* for themselves, in contradistinction. The name Kala Israel is therefore identical to some extent with the Biblical term גֵּר—"Stranger." The Cochin Jews were active missionaries, and hence Black Jews among them form a large majority. Among the Bene Israel, on the contrary, they are very few in number.

It is very often forgotten that the term "Black" does not refer to the colour at all. Indeed, there are some among the Black Jews who are fairer even than European Jews. The term is misunderstood, and hence is invariably misapplied by Westerns. Outsiders coming to India for the first time, and having heard vaguely about the White and Black Jews of India, and observing that the Yehoodis are on the whole fairer than the Bene Israel, hastily conclude that the former are the White, and the latter the Black Jews of India. And this mistake creeps into the works of men of intellect, who thus help to propagate an error by the weight of their authority. Mr Zangwill, for instance, in one of his Ghetto stories (Noah's Ark, *Ghetto Tragedies*) apparently identifies the Bene Israel with the Black Jews, when he says—

"Ararat is open too, to the Karaites and the Samaritans; the Black Jews of India and Africa shall be welcome; our brethren in Cochin-China, and the sect on the coast of Malabar—all are welcome."

He is even more explicit in *Ghetto Comedies* (Sabbath Question in Sudminster). The passage is worth quoting—

"'Have you been in India?'

'I have,' replied the Parnass, 'and I brought back to my wife something more stimulating than Chutney.'

'Indeed!'

'Yes, the story of the Bene-Israel, the Black Jews, who surrounded by all those millions of Hindoos, still keep the Sabbath.'

'Ah, poor niggers!'"

But the Bene Israel are *not* the Black Jews of India. How much this misapplication is resented by the Bene Israel can only be understood by one who has lived in India and has observed the bitter feeling of—not the Bene Israel alone—but of all Indians generally—against those of mixed descent[1].

The story of the Bene Israel begins about the 10th century C.E. According to tradition, somewhere about the beginning of that century, a Cochin Jew—David Rahabi—was travelling on the West coast of India, through a strip of country called the Konkan. In the course of his travels he was attracted by a curious name "Saturday Oilmen" given to one of the agricultural communities. On inquiry he found out that these oil pressers gained their name through a custom peculiar to them, that of resting on Saturday, and resting their oxen as well. This led him to make further inquiries; and the conclusion he came to was that this indeed was a community different from the surrounding Hindu peoples, and that it was undoubtedly of Hebrew stock.

Some of the evidences which led him to this conclusion, I shall briefly mention here.

These Saturday Oilmen called themselves *Bene Israel*, the Children of Israel.

He found a tradition current among them which said that their ancestors were not native to the country, but came from "the north." Years and years ago, they said, their ancestors set sail from this north country. A storm arose and the ship was wrecked on the West coast of India, and only seven men and seven women came safely to land. And they settled in the strange country they found themselves in, completely cut off from their own land and people.

[1] The writer in the *Jewish Year Book* 1911 also makes statements which are absolutely misleading. Thus he says,—"Ethnographically, the Jews in India may be divided into Black and White Jews (the former being sprung from marriages with native heathen women), or into native Jews and later settlers," apparently identifying Black Jews with native Jews, i.e. Cochin Jews and Bene Israel, and White Jews with later settlers, i.e. Jews of Bagdad and Europeans. This is an error which might be remedied in later editions of the publication.

In connection with this tradition it might be interesting to mention a Hindu legend from the same part of India.

The Konkan district is supposed to have been recovered from the sea by *Parashuram*, a hero-god of the Hindus. While debating within himself as to how this new land was to be peopled, he came across a number of dead bodies, evidently of foreigners, washed ashore from a wreck. These he placed on a funeral pyre, and they revived. Their descendants are called *Chitpavan Brahmins*, i.e. Brahmins saved from the funeral pyre. An impartial student of the Chitpavans would assuredly come to the conclusion, that they could not have been native to the land, but must have immigrated at a remote period. Can it be at all possible that the Chitpavans are another company of the forefathers of the Bene Israel who escaped the shipwreck, but who, unlike the Bene Israel, merged completely into the surrounding Hinduism?

Besides the tradition, David Rahabi had stronger evidence to go upon, and that is the evidence of customs. The observance of the Sabbath has already been mentioned as having first attracted his attention to this strange people. Among other Jewish observances he found were,—the Dietary Laws, *the Berith Mila*, and the *Keriath Shema*. The Shema was the only little bit of Hebrew they knew; it was repeated over and over again on all occasions, all festivals, all ceremonies.

Lastly there was the evidence of the festivals. All the fasts and feasts observed by the Bene Israel coincided with the principal Jewish fasts and festivals, the New Year's Day, the Day of Atonement, the Passover, Tabernacles, etc. Of course all these went under Indian names, the Hebrew forms being completely forgotten. Thus the Day of Atonement went under a name meaning *Fast of Door Closing*, because the Bene Israel shut themselves in their houses, fasting all day, and would have nothing to do with their gentile neighbours. Jacob Saphir who visited India in the seventies thinks that this probably referred to the additional

prayer of *Neila* נְעִילָה at the close of the Day of Atonement. The Bene Israel however had no conscious recollection of it.

I need not stop to describe all the festivals. They will be found treated in detail in the *Jewish Encyclopaedia*, or the *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, for any one who would want to know more about them.

The names of both men and women among the Bene Israel, as found by David Rahabi, were Indianized forms of Biblical names,—thus *Samajee* for Samuel (*Jee* being the Indian equivalent of Master), *Musajee* for Moses, *Isajee* for Isaac. As has been observed by almost every writer on the Bene Israel—"When the names of the Bene Israel are purely Indian, they do not appear to be in any case compounded with the name of any Hindu deity, as is largely the case among Hindus."

It would be worth while at this point to consider the evidence available, both internal and external, documentary, traditional or otherwise, to reconstruct the early history of the Bene Israel,—their original home, the probable date of their migration to India, etc.

First it is necessary to deal with a theory put forward by some regarding the origin of the Bene Israel:—The Cochin Jews are known to have been active conversionists. The first discoverer of the Bene Israel was a Cochin Jew. This fact, it is said, would suggest that the Bene Israel were originally an Indian community, probably Mahomedan, and were converted to Judaism by David Rahabi. Only one objection against this view need be mentioned. The Cochin Jews it is true were active conversionists. But they invariably distinguished their proselytes by the title *Kala Israel*, i.e. Black Jews. If the Bene Israel were proselytes, why did they not receive the title *Kala Israel*? Why would the Cochin Jews make an exception in their case alone?

Another theory put forward is that the Bene Israel arrived in the land without their women and children, and intermarried with the women of the land. There is conclusive evidence to show that such was not the case. Several

of the Jewish observances preserved among the Bene Israel, specially the dietary laws and the festivals, must have required the equal co-operation of both man and wife. The care with which the Bene Israel women separated clean from unclean food, distinguished forbidden things, sanctified the Sabbath and clung to the festivals, was particularly observed by David Rahabi. All these things would not be expected of gentile women, even after years of training.

And if all the women were gentile, how were their gods and goddesses kept out of the Bene Israel homes? Jacob had to suffer the Teraphim of his Syrian wife Rachel. Even the great Solomon, great king and wise man, could not refuse admittance to the strange gods of his wives. If the poor shipwrecked men in their staunch loyalty to their faith managed to do what the great king could not then they were strong indeed, and the Bene Israel have reason to be proud of their ancestors.

Another consideration, which might appear trifling here, but would mean a great deal in India, must be mentioned. It is a general practice among *Indian* women for the maidens and wives to have a spot of red powder on their foreheads, as a sign of good luck and good fortune. It was to be found even among Parsee women until quite recently. No such thing has ever been discovered among Bene Israel women.

It has been said that the dead tell no tales. The evidence they give for the Bene Israel is to me at least, as certain as death itself; and yet singularly it has never been mentioned at all by any writers on the subject. Those who have been to India will tell you that Bene Israel women dress exactly like their Hindu neighbours in every detail, there being nothing at all to distinguish one from the other. Let us go from the living to the dead, and we shall find that the body, prepared to be carried to its last resting place, is dressed in garments curiously like those of an Arabian or Palestine Jewess. What is the explanation? Believing as our forefathers did in bodily resurrection, can we not imagine their thoughts and feelings as they preserved their original garments

in their grave clothes, so that in the hour of Judgment at least, when they rise up and gather together with the dispersed of Israel, they should appear as Jews and dressed as Jews?

The next question for consideration is whether there has been any intermixture with the surrounding people.

Some there are among the Bene Israel who would say that owing to their custom of separating all those of mixed blood as *Kala Israel*, the Bene Israel have preserved the purity of their race better than any other Jewish community anywhere. They also point to the rigid caste system of the Hindus around them, and ask how would intermarriage be possible at all, with such alert watchfulness and strictness on both sides? There is some truth in this contention. For the caste system, if it did not make intermarriages absolutely impossible, by its harsh restrictions and severe regulations for dealing with any breaches of caste law, prevented intermarriages from becoming common. So that it is not quite correct to say, as the writer of the article on the Bene Israel says in the *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*,—"the Bene Israel at their first introduction into India must have made somewhat *free alliances* with the women of the land." That was a thing just impossible in a caste-bound land like India.

Some would argue from featural characteristics. But what do these signify? Jews all the world over tend to approximate to the inhabitants of their adopted motherland,—not only in general manners and social customs but in physical characteristics as well. Many a Chinese Jew is typically Chinese, as many an English Jew is typically English. So, many a Bene Israel is typically Indian in appearance.

If there has been any intermixture, it can only have been at the fringes. I am arguing here from the analogy of the present day Black Jews among the Bene Israel. They are, as I said at the beginning, surprisingly few in number. They can all be traced back to a gentile ancestor not more than three or four generations ago; and invariably, the

ancestor who took a gentile wife, and thus brought gentile blood into the *family*, was in the service of the British East India Company. It is the fringes that are always getting entangled. Perhaps in the old days when our forefathers went on spreading from one village in the Konkan to another, further and further off from the main central settlement—perhaps then too the fringes got a little entangled. Adventurous young men going further afield in search of a living, and having settled comfortably in their new homes, might not invariably think it worth while to return to their old homes in search of a wife, as Isaac and Jacob thought best to do.

The question, When the Bene Israel came to India, is difficult to decide for want of authentic historical documents. But there is a great deal of internal evidence, which is awaiting a master-hand to work it up into genuine history. I can only give a few obvious facts:—

Take, for instance, the absence of certain festivals from the Bene Israel calendar, such as Hanuka. That might point to the possible arrival of the Bene Israel into India before the Maccabean period. It might here be said that Hanuka being a minor festival was forgotten in course of time by the Bene Israel. I would set against it the following fact which might or might not mean anything:—About the same time as Hanuka, the Hindus celebrate their festival of *Dipavali*, one of the chief characteristics of which is illumination. Dipavali, in fact, means a line of lights. Having this constant reminder before them, is it at all likely that the Bene Israel would forget their own feast of lights, if they had known it, or merely imitate Karaism in rejecting it?

An amusing instance of the way the Bene Israel sometimes sought to bring coinciding Indian and their own festivals into some sort of connection is Purim (Purim, by the way, is a feast of later introduction: and the name Esther was unknown among the Bene Israel when they were first discovered). Purim falls during the Hindu festival of *Holi*, when the Hindus light huge bonfires and dance around and

shout and make weird noises. The Bene Israel jestingly say that "Haman the enemy of the Jews was a Hindu: and that while we are rejoicing over our deliverance, the Hindus shout their lamentation around the bonfires, which represent the funeral pyre of Haman the Hindu."

The various social and religious customs in vogue among the Bene Israel at the time of their discovery, their traditions and superstitions, if submitted to historical investigation, ought to help in fixing the date at which they were finally cut off from the rest of the Jewish world. To mention a few:—The Nazirite vow was quite a common thing until very recent times. In the various domestic celebrations,—and all celebrations were domestic, there being no synagogues at all,—burning of frankincense, and the pouring out of a cup of wine, are prominent features, obviously relics of the ancient drink and incense offering: נֶסֶךְ and קְטֹרֶת. And the particular kind of food-preparations, etc., and the manner of its disposal on special days, have led the Rev. J. H. Lord to say in his article on the Bene Israel, "The impression irresistibly conveyed to the observer by all this is that these are survivals in this community of the ancient meal-offerings מִנְחָה of Mosaic times, if not also vestiges of ancient sacrifices themselves."

The evidence to be derived from the surnames of the Bene Israel has hitherto been entirely neglected. The Bene Israel derived their surnames from the villages where they or their ancestors settled. Thus those who settled in Rajapur, called themselves Rajpurkars, those in Tul, Tulkar and so on. In connection with this may I mention a peculiar fact—not found in any other Indian community, but peculiar to the Bene Israel alone,—and that is the form of the surname of married women. The wife of a Penkar would be Penkar*a*, that of Kehimkar, Kehimkar*a*. Is it an unconscious survival of the Hebrew feminine termination ־ָה ?

As the surnames give practically all the villages in which the Bene Israel settled, it ought to help in determining to some extent the early fortunes of the Bene Israel, their

migration from village to village; it ought to help us in fixing the fringe, and in determining what chance of intermarriages there was in these outlying settlements. The village records, so far as I know, have never been searched for references to the Bene Israel settlers. Surely they would yield us some historical facts concerning the Bene Israel?

Surnames might also give certain clues as to the date of arrival in India. The following fact which supports my contention was pointed out some years ago by a Bene Israel. On the Konkan coast there are two somewhat important towns—Revdanda and Alibag. Curiously enough there are no Bene Israel surnames derived from these two towns. And yet two other insignificant little villages Rohé and Ashtami, quite close to the first mentioned, give us the Rohekars and the Ashtamkars. This might tell us that the Bene Israel arrived in India long before the towns of Alibag and Revdanda grew up. And the history of these towns would help to fix the date of the arrival of the Bene Israel in one direction at least.

It has been always a question why the Bene Israel never had a language of their own,—a dialect of Hebrew,—to correspond with the Yiddish of Germany and Poland. The Bene Israel when they were first discovered were found to be speaking a very corrupt form of Marathi, one of the vernaculars of India. It is true that at the present there are in vogue several words of Arabic or Hebrew origin. But the question is whether these words came down from early times, or are of recent introduction. Some of these words are,—*Aba* (father); *Murabi*, a title of respect, though often used in the sense of a wiseacre; *Jolapha* (anger: cf. Hebrew וְלַעֲפָה); *Iz-bal-la*, an epithet for a shrew (אִיזֶבֶל).

Certain phonetic peculiarities in the Marathi spoken by the Bene Israel must be here noted. The Indian letters ण and ळ (which cannot be properly represented in English, but are harder forms of *n* and *l*) the Bene Israel find as difficult to pronounce as any Western, and invariably substitute the softer न (*n*) and ल (*l*). So also with the letter ड (*d*) for

which the Bene Israel substitute the softer र (*r*). Compare with this the English preference for *r* instead of *d* in transcribing names of places in India. Thus *Berar* for *Verhad*; *Kathiawar* for *Kathiawad*. There is also some difficulty in pronouncing the letter फ (which is like the *p* and *h* sounded together in "top-*hat*"). The Bene Israel pronounce it like the English *f* or ફ. This is rather curious when taken into consideration with the fact that the average Indian finds it difficult to pronounce *f*, there being no sound to correspond with it in the Indian language. All these sounds mentioned here ण (*ṇ*), ळ (*ḷ*), ड (*ḍ*), फ (*p-h*) are wanting in Hebrew and the Semitic languages.

It would be best to conclude this section with a consideration of the name Bene Israel, which has been rather a stumbling-block. It has been suggested that the people adopted the name because of the Mahomedans, who hated the name "Jew," but were inclined to look leniently upon *Bene Israel*, who are spoken of in kind terms in the Koran. This would mean that the name was adopted later than the 6th century C.E. If the Bene Israel were in India before that, under what name did they go? To my mind this is only an imaginary difficulty. The name *Jew* is later than בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל for Jews as a whole. And in the form בְּנֵי יְהוּדָה it was used to distinguish the sons of Judah from the ten tribes who were Bene Israel, i.e. Children of Israel. So when our people in India are found to be calling themselves Bene Israel, the fact does not need any explanation. There is no question of *choice*. They called themselves Bene Israel, because they were Bene Israel and not Bene Jehudah. And this is somewhat confirmed by the fact that the name *Judah* was not found among the Bene Israel. If this conclusion be correct, then purists would object to our being called *Jews*. We are not Jews, i.e. Children of Judah, we are Bene Israel.

These are only a few points, but I put them before you to indicate the path which the historian of the Bene Israel will have to pursue. It might be as well to mention here that all these land-marks are fast disappearing in the present effort

of the Bene Israel to conform themselves in all respects to Jewish customs elsewhere. In a few years, no traces of the old order of things would be left. It is therefore a great pity that the subject has not been taken up for study by any Jewish Historical Society,—while yet there is time and opportunity.

The rest of the paper will concern itself with a brief survey of the religious and social condition of the Bene Israel from the period of David Rahabi.

After satisfying himself that he had found a genuine Hebrew community which had remained hidden till then, David Rahabi set himself to teach and instruct them. He found them ignorant of all the principles of Judaism, great and small; ignorant of the significance of the ceremonies and festivals to which they clung so tenaciously; ignorant of the fact that there was anything at all to know. He came and awakened them to the fact that they were not a poor isolated community, but formed part of a wonderful people, with a glorious past, a rich present and a future, creating in them an intense desire to be one with their people. It is David Rahabi then whom the Bene Israel revere as their first teacher, the first who brought them back to their inheritance.

It was not an easy task that he undertook and it can hardly be said to be completed even at the present day.

The work of David Rahabi was to reorganise the religious life of the community. This he did not only by personal instruction, but by specially training two of his pupils so that they might be able to act as religious leaders after him. These were called *Kazis*, and their descendants are still proud to claim the title. The *Kazis* (the title and office descended from father to son) can with justice be called the *Cohanim* of the Bene Israel, and they continued their work until quite recent times.

Hitherto the *Shema* was the only Hebrew to be found among the people. David Rahabi began by teaching the Bene Israel their long forgotten sacred language, and gradually introduced the liturgy of the Cochin Jews.

Several new festivals, new to the Bene Israel, were now introduced. These festivals of later introduction can be distinguished by their *Mahomedan* titles from the original festivals which went under *Hindu* names.

One surviving evidence of the reforming zeal of David Rahabi strikes the onlooker as proof of the great difficulties he had to contend with, and as to how very often he must have "stooped to conquer." Following the custom of their neighbours, the Bene Israel looked a great deal to local saints for aid against the evils of this life. Rahabi could not altogether put this down,—perhaps he tried and found it to be unwise, and so he substituted the cult of Elijah the Prophet, אליהו הנביא. We can almost hear David Rahabi contending,—"Why need you invoke this Muslim saint, or that Hindu *Sadhu*, when we have a saint of our own to go to? Have we not Elijah the great Prophet, who is greater for good and evil than any of the local saints?" This cult still survives to a certain extent and requires to be strenuously fought down.

Rahabi did not have a long career as a worker among the Bene Israel, as he was murdered at the instigation of the African chief of Janjira; and the period of *awakening* inaugurated by him was succeeded by a period of *effort* on the part of the people themselves to come to their own. This was also partly a period of isolation, for though it is true that from the time of Rahabi, the Bene Israel were known to Jews in Cochin and in Bagdad, and were from time to time visited by itinerant teachers from those parts, whom they honoured by the title *Hachamim*, and indeed every foreign Jew was in the eyes of the Bene Israel a Hacham, still as yet the Bene Israel were considered as a people apart.

It was during this period that the Bene Israel first began to leave their homes in the Konkan, as soldiers in the army of the British East India Company. This might be called their second expansion. There was a steady migration from the Konkan, in the wake of the army, and though the Konkan was still their central home, local centres were formed in

different important towns of the Western Presidency, chief among them being Bombay, Poona, Ahmedabad and Karachi.

This period culminated in a second religious revival, the leader being again a Jew from Cochin, Ḥacham Shelomoh Shurrabi. The efforts at reform now not only concern religious matters, but educational as well, and lead on directly to the foundation of the Anglo-Jewish Association School in Bombay, and to the present period which I would characterise as the period of *Anglicisation*. It is partly due to the influence of the English, partly to the desire of the Bene Israel to be identified with their co-religionists in Europe, and specially in England.

To conclude then with a brief summary of the chief points of interest connected with the Bene Israel *of the present day*.

They number about 10,000, the rest of the Jews in India numbering about 8000. They are still principally concentrated in the Konkan. Besides the new centres mentioned above, there is now in progress a third expansion in search of a living. Individual families and individuals are found in different parts of India, who attract other Bene Israel settlers, and thus tend to form new congregations. Two of these, Quetta in the far north-west frontier of India, and Aden, might be here mentioned to show how far the Bene Israel have migrated.

In Religious belief and forms of worship, there is nothing to differentiate them at the present from Jews of other lands. The Sephardic form of liturgy is followed in all their synagogues. Wherever there is a large Bene Israel congregation there is a Synagogue, or at least a temporary Prayer Hall. The readers (חזנים) are usually Jews from Cochin or Yehoodis, though Bene Israel Ḥazanim are not unknown. There are no ministers and—consequently—no sermons.

Communal Organisation concerns itself practically only with the religious life of the people. There are different congregations centred round the synagogues or prayer halls,—all distinct from one another, each a unit in itself, having no connection with the others. There is no one central authority,—no Chief Rabbi. Every man is a Chief Rabbi

to himself, and consequently very often rival congregations are set up, which has gained for the people the title "quarrelsome." It is the right of every man to think for himself. And we in India are primitive enough to believe in that principle, and do not suffer an external central authority to dictate matters.

The affairs of each congregation are managed by a council of five elders, corresponding to the Sephardic *Mahamad*. Each adult member of the congregation is expected to be present at the meetings of the Council and help in the deliberations. In the old days this Council of Five had great authority, civil as well as religious, and by means of its chief weapon of excommunication had great hold on the people. Sometimes it wielded its power tyrannically, as in the case of Black Jews, who were not allowed any intercourse with the rest of the community, and were allowed only a distant corner of the synagogue and the cemetery.

At the present day the organised congregation exists only for the upkeep of the Synagogue, the Cemetery, and the Shamash (Beadle).

The Shamash is an institution in himself. He ministers to the community in various ways. He is the herald, and one of his duties is to go from house to house announcing the coming fasts or feasts, or distributing word of mouth invitations to communal feasts, or announcing births, marriages and deaths in the community. In fact he is the living advertiser, and the voice of the Shamash in the distance is enough to bring everyone to the door to know what has happened. His words are listened to with as much eagerness as the announcement columns of a local newspaper are scanned by, say, the London Jewish Community. In fact he fills the place of an ordinary communal newspaper and advertiser to perfection, and if at any time he be superseded by a paper, in all courtesy and justice to his services it ought to be called the "Shamash."

The Shamash also takes the place of the communal directory. In a small community everyone knows everything about everyone else. The Shamash has all this knowledge organised and classified and ready to hand.

Then he also acts as the communal alarum clock. During the forty penitential days before the Day of Atonement, the Bene Israel rise up early in the morning, at three or even before, to say the Selihoth or Penitential Prayers. The Shamash goes from house to house calling upon everyone by name to get up for Selihoth, and usually will persist in calling until he receives an answering call from within.

Such and so various are the duties of the Shamash; and his privileges are as great. They can be more easily imagined than described.

If the community is organised only for religious purposes, what about other things you will say, about the poor, the fatherless and the widow, about education and other social matters?

The chief answer to the question is that the joint family system prevalent among the Bene Israel—brothers and sons and uncles all living together as one family—insured the poor and the incapable against destitution. And hence orphanages and homes for the destitute were not wanted. The family was its own orphanage and its own workhouse. No professional begging is allowed either within or without the community. This is specially noticeable in India where the multitude of beggars able-bodied or otherwise presents a problem of some magnitude.

At the present moment when the joint family is rapidly breaking down, if there is not to be a wholesale slaughter of the destitute, there must be some effort made to substitute a charity organisation to take over the duties of the old family. The existing philanthropic institutions are still feeble,—chiefly because they have not been particularly needed so far,—and they are practically of a private character.

Of course the Bene Israel, as one of the Indian peoples, can take advantage of the various Government institutions. And so they do. But in general institutions of this kind it is not usually possible to have special attention given to their peculiar needs, nor is it reasonable to expect it.

It would be pertinent here to insert a few remarks on the relations between the Bene Israel and the other peoples of India, and also between them and the British Government.

One of the first questions to be asked is—"Is there any anti-Semitism in India?"

It would not be far from the truth to say that anti-Semitism appears usually when Jews are rich and powerful and when they form an important factor in the life of their adopted country. The Bene Israel are not only insignificant in numbers, but they have been so far poor and obscure.

Then there are so many different peoples in the land, that the presence of one more peculiar people does not count, and does not particularly attract hostile attention. Besides that, the Hindu religion is one of the most tolerant of the religions of the world.

The British Government is not particularly interested in a poor insignificant community, whom it does not consider to be powerful either for good or evil. The Bene Israel is only one of the many peoples of India, the only thing perhaps that distinguishes them is that they are of the people and yet not of the people.

This latter fact gives rise sometimes to very absurd anomalies. Our girls go to schools which are avowedly for *Indians*, compete for prizes which are reserved for those of *purely native parentage*. Our boys usually prefer schools for *European and Eurasian boys*. They are members of the Volunteer Corps, from which Indians are excluded. Both men and women in some departments of Government Service are unhesitatingly admitted into the European grade.

This would bring us to the occupations, trades and professions favoured by the Bene Israel. There is a general tendency among them to try and enter Government service, which if not lucrative is at least secure. There are a few in the independent professions such as Law and Medicine. Bene Israel women excel as nurses, and are everywhere in demand. Special mention must be made of Bene Israel carpenters and masons, who are celebrated all over Bombay, and are in evidence wherever a specially skilled artist is wanted. The unfortunate and inexplicable thing about them is that though they make good day-labourers they lack enterprise and organisation to set up for themselves an independent business,

which would surely tend to improve their position to a great extent. Perhaps it is due to the want of capital, and many an able carpenter has to drudge and toil for a master for a shilling a day, when he is capable himself of being a master workman, and thus a unit of some importance in the community due to the self-confidence, self-respect and independence of spirit sprung from a sense of his own power.

Some time ago the army was a great attraction to the Bene Israel. They invariably distinguished themselves therein both as non-commissioned and commissioned officers. Almost every Bene Israel who entered the army rose to be an officer. Since the new system of the Indian army, with regiments grouped according to the different castes, the Bene Israel with one accord have abandoned the army as a profession. And that is what naturally would be expected. For first of all there would not be a sufficient number to form a regiment of their own. And then a Bene Israel in the army was like cork in water—he simply had to come to the top; there was no help. And so there would have to be a regiment solely of officers for no Bene Israel would be content to remain a private.

It is a strange thing that the Bene Israel have never taken to commerce, and no explanation which is entirely satisfactory has hitherto been forthcoming.

The learned professions are now the goal of all English educated Bene Israel, and it is time to make a few remarks on education before concluding.

Our boys and girls go to Missionary or Government schools where the greatest stress is laid on English Education. And that they do remarkably well the following fact will show. In an English High School for Indian girls, where only one-fourth were Bene Israel, out of *twenty-seven* scholarships awarded for merit, the Bene Israel girls held *nineteen*. The Bene Israel appreciate the advantages of education and eagerly send their children to school, and usually contrive to contribute something towards schooling expenses even though they be very poor.

Now in this there is much ground for satisfaction. But there are other factors to consider. The general trend of English Education in India is towards Anglicisation; and one's contentment must be incomplete if the Anglicisation misconceives itself and intrudes into realms where it has no right. This is the point where the Anglo-Jewish Association has a real opportunity. At present there is very little in the Israelite School at Bombay to distinguish it from an ordinary Indian school, except perhaps the substitution of Hebrew for Sanskrit as the classical language learnt. And if one tries to find out what this teaching of Hebrew means, it is discovered to be nothing more than study of grammar, and it might be Sanskrit or French or Chinese grammar, for aught the difference it would make to the children. It is not my intention to blame anyone, as it is the System of Education which is responsible. Unless the school strikes out for itself a new path, and frees itself from the trammels of custom and routine, it will be unable properly to control the growing Anglicisation which unfortunately involves alienation from Jewish ideals. English education so far has proved a centrifugal force, which tends to cut off all English educated members from the community.

I said above that *Anglicisation* is the keynote of modern Jewry in India, as it is in England and elsewhere. It is seen in all things—language, dress, social customs, etc. It is not necessary to enlarge upon all these. They are familiar to you in England. But as dress is an outstanding feature, which first attracts the outsider's attention, it will not be out of place to mention a few facts. Things are moving rapidly in Indian Jewry to-day, and anyone who is interested could study evolution in costume there to great perfection. For there are no missing links, so to speak; no species is as yet extinct, and from the original Indian dress to the full blown European costume, *all stages* of the transition are in full vigour. The little boy who was taken to a Synagogue in a big town for the first time, was unconsciously struck by the humour of the situation, when he naively remarked—"How is it, mother, that in our Temple there are Hindus and

Mahomedans, Parsees and Europeans as well as Jews?" He was referring to the different costumes.

How is it going to end? In complete Anglicisation some say, and try and promote it to the best of their ability. Others look with ever-growing disfavour on this, but shake their heads and say, "We cannot go against the tide of evolution,—we must go with it, whether we will or no, and be dashed over the cataract into the whirlpool below." Others again are asking themselves "Can nothing be done?" And they look to *the School* with hope. They believe in the famous dictum which says—"Let me have the children of this generation, and I shall answer for the next." Therefore some of us are turning our eyes with hope to the Anglo-Jewish Association, those of us who, while believing that Anglicisation is both inevitable and desirable, would yet endeavour to set in motion at the same time a process of deepening the love for Judaism and the retention of its moral, religious and institutional influences. The School being the centre of communal life, by its right Jewish spirit it could do much towards fighting against the growing indifference to and alienation from Jewish ideals.

David Rahabi in the 10th century brought the Bene Israel back to their old inheritance. Our work in the 20th is to make them understand and appreciate it. They must be shown how to impenetrate their lives with Judaism so that there shall result not a conflict of ideals but a harmonization. Out of the past and present influences there may emerge something higher, more complete and more progressive than either. But this is an impossible hope unless Judaism is the basis on which this higher harmony is built.

REBECCA REUBEN.

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